

SEVEN 21 RUN

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JEEZ! TEN MORE *minutes*. *This night . . .* From my watch I catch a peripheral glimpse of a loiterer. *Move along. There's nothing for you here.* He's sizing me up. *Go . . . Go . . . Yes! The poke catches a clue.*

I glance over and see the fella taking a seat at table 15, Levi's game. Everyone likes Levi. She has a fondness for gab, and most customers are desperate for social interaction. That's why my table is empty; I've developed a reputation for quiet, quick, and sure destruction of personal fortunes, with an emphasis on quiet.

The guy pulls out a white-trash bankroll—a \$20 bill wrapped around a wad of singles. He's a tip earner like everyone in Las Vegas' illustrious service industry. The singles signify he's not a casino dealer. We get our tips in big bills from the casino cage after they're pooled, counted, divided by hours worked and reported to the IRS. He's probably a valet, bartender, or poker dealer. They keep their own tips and report only a small portion to the government. Lucky stiff.

It won't take long before he realizes Levi is the slowest Blackjack dealer in the casino. Some people really like that; it takes longer to lose your money. The house hates it because time *is* money. I'm the fastest dealer in the casino at Blackjack and Pai Gao Poker. Management loves my speed but detests my apathetic attitude. They would like to take my quick accurate hands and splice them into Levi's gregarious personality. That would be ideal, but the reason we speed demons deal at break-neck speeds is to burn through the customers so they leave, and we can resume our lives of quiet contemplation waiting for our next twenty-minute break.

A sober, quiet tipper is the only reason I can justify slowing down. However, for everyone concerned, not counting the casino, it would be best if the tippers played at Levi's table or any dealer who keeps a steady flow of dialogue going. They tend to be more mistake prone and less lucky for the house. Case in point: In my ten years of speed dealing I have yet to award winnings exceeding \$500. That is exceptional. The downside is that I rarely

carry my weight in tips.

I glance at my watch once again and swear that I now have twelve minutes to go. Time is running backwards. It certainly feels that way. Across the aisle in pit two, Ike stands at a dead game. His hands rest on the printed felt layout at the sides of the rack, its rows stocked with nearly \$50,000 in cheques. He turns away from anyone walking near his table. An ancient woman carrying a bucket of silver dollars shuffles by, and Ike rotates back to me. We both shrug and eye our watches. *Still twelve minutes.*

I look up and Ike has a yellow cut card in his left hand. Its purpose is to cut a freshly shuffled deck and hide its exposed underside. Ike has the balls to do things on the table that I wouldn't dare and starts performing magic tricks making the cut card disappear then reappear from his outstretched hand. He's always horsing around. I won't attempt the sleight of hand because surveillance despises me. My speed dealing makes their lives difficult, and they love to reciprocate. They've called down three times this past year telling me to slow the action on a Pai Gao game. If they dealt Pai Gao they would understand why I race the play. Pai Gao players are boring! Some can fiddle for four hours on \$20, lose nothing, win nothing. Basically, they sit for the free drinks and never tip.

Ike now has three yellow cut cards. They disappear then, one at a time, reappear from his hand. Slick. Suddenly, one slips free and sails into the aisle. A passing customer retrieves it for him—spilling her drink in the process—then takes a seat, obliging him to work. Ha! Serves him right.

I glance at my watch. Eleven minutes. *Damn.* I really shouldn't watch the clock, or I'll get jinxed like Ike. To my right Levi raps a \$5 cheque against the rack and drops it in the dealers' token box. *Good girl.* The table to my left is Chong's. She's Korean and speaks little English but she tries. Actually, the casino doesn't allow anything but English. It's a security thing. You can never tell when a Korean mother of four might help a compatriot cheat a \$5 blackjack game.

Sitting at Chong's table is a customer named Sheila or Sherry or . . . I'll call her SH. One might think I would remember her name; she's my stalker of sorts. SH comes in every weekend, gets drunk somewhere then inevitably migrates to my table late in the evening to irritate me with her stares and innuendos. To exhibit her affection she will often bet \$10 for herself and \$25 for me. Creepy. She asked me out once. I nearly gagged. Thankfully, she's sitting at Chong's table with her back to me. If I can get through the next . . .

Twelve minutes? Can't be. I hold my wrist to my ear expecting silence, but no. It's still ticking. Again, I resume my position as "guardian of the rack." I like that title. It sounds regal.

"What time you get off," a voice comes from my left.

I want to ignore her but can see in the periphery of my vision that SH is turned completely in her chair looking my way. *Shit.*

I turn to her. "Hey . . ." I can't rightly call her SH so I skip it. "Any minute now," I say and give a friendly, but not too friendly, smile.

"You need company?"

"Noooo. I like it quiet." I turn to Ike who now has a full table. That's the problem with letting that first person sit at your game: It's like an invite to all the loiterers. It only takes one then miraculously you have a full table. Poor Ike. He's at a game with a six-deck shoe and no shuffler. That means he shuffles six decks of cards by hand. Well, better him than me.

I glance again at my watch, but before I see the time, a hulk sits at first base on my left. *Crap. Jinxed myself.* Looking up I see SH giving me her trademark drunk lust-eye as she spills her cheques on the layout.

"Hi, sexy. I'm gonna play with you." She titters and my skin crawls.

"Great," I respond, trying to sound pleased to see her sitting there, but it comes out smarmy. I can't help it. Collecting up the two decks spread in an arc across the layout, I proceed with the intricate shuffle procedure designed to maximize the randomness of the cards.

SH gathers her cheques in a neat pile and slides forth a \$10 bet. Nothing is bet for the dealer which, considering her obsession, is a good thing for me. It means she's relatively lucid.

"Are you hot tonight? Wait. What am I *saying*? You're always hot." Again she titters.

If she were hot I'd be soaking up the admiration, but she's not, and so it gives me the heeby jeebies. I'm very shallow and she's maybe seventy pounds overweight, too Latin for my liking and nuts. If I were crazy then perhaps, but I'm not and so . . . no.

The shuffle is complete, so I place a cut card askew atop

the deck and offer it to SH. She pulls the yellow card out of my hand then slides it into the deck slowly, attempting to make this a sexual thing. It doesn't work, not for me. I pull the deck back, split it at the cut card, re-stack it, and tuck it securely in my left palm. My forefinger conceals the front edge. I have perfect form. The only way someone will see my cards is if they pay me \$1,000,000 and guarantee my bail.

"You ready?" I ask, hoping I can bankrupt her quickly before someone else decides to sit and bother me.

"For you, I'm always ready."

Uugh. She's staring at me as I avoid eye contact and feign deaf. Lowering the deck to the layout, I slide a card off and place it in the discard tray. This is called burning a card and is intended to disrupt card counters and cheats. It really serves to show that we take security seriously. Then again, some players think I'm pulling a fast one, cheating as if the dealer needs to cheat to win.

The first dealt card flies from my fingertips and wedges under the padded rim of the table behind SH's bet. The second card out drops from my hands and lands face up in front of me, as intended. It flutters still as SH's second card wedges itself under the first. For *my* second card I lower the deck to my face-up card—a ten of spades—and with snake-strike speed I slide a card off and flick it under my first card. This move is called the hole card slide and it's perfect. If anyone can see my hole card, I'll give them my tips for a year.

"You're in a mood," she says, pulls her cards free, takes a look at them and motions for a hit.

"Not me," I say, sliding a card from the top of the deck and, in a fluid sweep, leave it face up in front of her bet.

It's a queen of diamonds, and SH tosses her cards onto the layout. Because she's sitting at first base, on my left, I use my deck hand to flip her cards over and spread them face up next to the queen. Using the hand closest to the player allows me to keep an eye on my cheques. If I don't and some unscrupulous dick reaches into the rack and steals something, then it's me who pays for the mistake.

SH's dealt cards were a ten of clubs and six of hearts: sixteen, the most dreaded hand in Blackjack. I spread her cards face up in a fairly neat row to see what she had but also so the overhead cameras can document the hand in case there's a beef, as will sometimes occur.

26. She busted. I leave her cards long enough to get my hands clear of the camera then slide the cards together, slip them under her failed \$10 bet and draw it back into the rack. The old cards go face down in the plexiglass discard tray on my right. With her busted hand cleared away, I snatch my face-up card, slip a corner under the hole card, flip it over, and immediately sweep the cards off the table and into the discard tray. I had a four under

the ten.

"You're trying to spank me," SH says with a provocative smile, of all things.

"It's not me, it's the cards," I respond automatically.

She puts another \$10 in the circle and \$5 above it as a bet for me. I hate that. It feels like a come-on. While I don't feel guilty for shunning her advances, I still must thank her for the bet whether she wins or not. Plus, I think her perception of my thank you is off kilter. To her the gesture of appreciation is a term of endearment.

Go away, and I'll shower you with thank yous.

She stays.

I straighten the loose cheques in my rack then sweep my arm across the layout before dealing the next hand. The sweep is a habit some dealers develop. It alerts the players that all bets should be down. It also covers my ass when I skip some inattentive dolt who fails to place a bet in time and subsequently raises a stink. With the hand sweep, I can tell the floorman to call surveillance, and they will see that I gave fair warning. (They won't bother looking at the tape, but the customer doesn't know this.)

I bring my hand up ready to whip some cards out when someone tosses a wad of money on the layout.

"How's the fucking table?" a middle-aged guy asks as he hobbles to my game, places a half empty Corona beer bottle on the rail, and sits in the center position directly in front of me. He hangs a cane on the rail, has disheveled curly grey hair, and, behind prescription aviator glasses, his eyes are bloodshot and half open.

"Just started. Second hand," I inform him, holding back the deal. Oftentimes these drunks will leave if they miss the first hand of a deck. They think the missing hand will jinx their luck or skew their tracking of the cards. They refuse to wait through an entire deck so they leave. This guy stays.

His eyes lock on me as if my words caught him off guard. "Change my fucking money..." He squints to see my name badge. "... Boob."

SH chortles, then, "I hope you change my luck."

Again, reacting a second behind sober, the drunk guy turns to the voice. "What's wrong honey? This guy suck?"

"No. He's nice. The cards suck," she says, gleaming at me.

"Uh huh." He looks back to me. I'm in the middle of spreading his cash across the layout. As important as spreading the cards is for the cameras, spreading the cash is doubly so. No one wants an argument over cash, especially the dealer and especially with a drunk.

"Gim'me greens."

The drunkard has \$420 all in \$20 bills. I overlap the edges of each bill vertically in groups of one-hundred

dollars. The spare \$20 sits horizontally to show that it is a partial grouping. Next, I place on the layout four stacks of four green \$25 cheques and one stack of four red \$5 cheques.

"Change four twenty!" I call out to the floorman.

"Change four twenty!" is the reply from the podium behind me and fifteen feet south in the pit. The floorman is Dean Gates. He's the best, a big guy who nearly always puts the dealers first in a beef.

With my call-out, Dean will pencil 420 on the tracking sheet associated with this table. The sheet documents each game's performance, what it wins or loses, number of players frequenting the game, how much cash it earns, and more. It's amazing how little is left to chance, in these games of chance.

I stack the cheques and slide them around the cash to the drunk guy. Then I gather the money into a neat pile and force it into the table's cash box using a plastic paddle. The cash box resides under the table until removed and transported to the cage at the end of every shift. From there, a roomful of Italians count and split the money into three piles: skim, graft, and profit. (Not really.)

"Alright. Let's play some fuckin' cards!" the drunk shouts.

Right now every dealer within fifty feet feels sorry for me having to deal with a loud drunk. The floormen within earshot have zeroed in and marked him for scrutiny. The drunk's not only a jerkoff, he's an idiot jerkoff. I delight in taking his type down a dozen notches. Remarkably, it's what keeps me dealing cards. Regarding him, I should be able to clean his clock in... oh... ten minutes.

"Here we go," I say, again sweeping my hand across the layout.

"Hold the fuck on!" the drunk says as he fumbles with his cheques. "Hey..." He seems perplexed about his bet, or more likely he's attempting to take a shot. Usually if someone wants to pull a fast one on the table they'll wait until a sense of calm has fallen. The drunk guy isn't that smart.

"You shorted me!" He looks up at me with his half-mast eyelids and attempts a look of incredulity.

When a problem develops, I'm required to call a floorman over and let them handle it. However, to accelerate matters, I reach over the table, grab the drunk's cheques, and count them out again in front of him. "Four hundred twenty," I say, then re-stack the sixteen green and four red cheques into one stack and pound them soundly onto the layout in front of him. "We gonna play, or you wanna fuck around?" I ask quietly with a smile.

A fact about obnoxious drunks: no one likes nor believes them. If this guy decides to continue his bullshit, I

will win. He's already been labeled a troublemaker by his rotten language. With his red-veined eyes he studies me then spills his cheques in defiance.

"Right," I say. "Let's play."

SH hasn't said a word. When I glance her way she is wearing a smile and winks at me. I think she gets off on the tension. *Aack.*

I'm about to sweep my hand again when another gentleman takes a seat at third base to my right. As I feared, the ice has broken and now my table is fair game. The new fella brings a plastic cheque rack filled with roughly \$2,000 in various denominations.

"How's the table doing?" he asks.

"Don't know yet. We've been jerking around," I say, looking at our drunk friend. He's swaying and eyeing the newcomer.

"What's your name buddy?!" the sot asks. His volume and equilibrium are equally impaired.

The new guy makes the mistake of ignoring the drunk.

"What the fuck's *your* problem, pal?" Our inebriated guest is indignant.

I slap my hand on the layout in front of him. Slowly he turns my way. "Watch your mouth. There's a lady at the table," I tell him.

The drunk guy looks at the new guy then over at SH then at me and asks, "Where?"

Inside I'm laughing because that was funny, but SH doesn't agree. With words often directed at me, she grumbles, "You asshole."

The drunk guy makes one chuckle then looks to the new guy. "What's your name buddy?"

"Hey!" I snap my fingers. "What's yours?"

Drunk guy looks at me, ponders the question then says, "Chuck."

"Great, Chuck. You ready to play?"

Pause, then, "Yeah! Let's play some fucking cards!"

I know Dean is looking my way for any trouble so I cheat a glance over my shoulder and shake my head. He goes back to his business at the podium.

The new guy is bookish, wears Buddy Holly glasses, a shiny black nightclub shirt, black jeans, has neatly parted hair, and is not drinking. I'd say he's probably thirty and not from Los Angeles where most of Las Vegas' customers and citizens come from. He looks to be from Sacramento or Phoenix and is trying desperately to fit in. He places \$10 on his betting circle. Next to his cheques I notice a small basic strategy chart. It marks the new guy a freshman gambler.

The strategy charts are available in gift shops throughout town and instruct in the most intelligent way to play any casino game. The casinos don't mind. In fact they like to see the charts because when people *know* how to

play the game, they *will*. Besides, the house always has the odds. The secret to winning isn't strategy; it's money management. That's why people count cards: to optimize their betting.

For the fifth time in two minutes, I sweep the table and am interrupted yet again. This time an old lady sidles up between Chuck and SH.

"Hi," I say nicely because she is old and a regular named Genie. Everyone knows her by the oxygen bottle on wheels, the plastic tubes running up her nose and the dangling generic cigarette.

As usual, she doesn't respond to my greeting. Instead, she flops her massive ass into the seat, assumes the scowl we all adore and places the minimum bet. It never varies. This will be her bet until her nightly allocation is gone. She never tips, citing a fixed income for her cheapness, and she drinks the astringent house wine by the bucket.

"Okay. Are we ready to play?" I ask, expecting everyone's attention. The drunk, Chuck, can't seem to pull his eyes from Genie. I see trouble.

"Good God you're old! Can I bum a smoke?"

Genie can't afford to let her blood pressure rise, but it does. Her breathing becomes labored, and instead of wasting precious breath, she struggles up and waddles away.

"Bye, Genie," I yell, but she ignores me. "You forgot . . ."

Chuck nabs her abandoned yellow pack of generics, removes a cigarette and sparks it up using a lighter built into the butt of his cane. "Let's play some fucking cards!" He coughs. "And bring me a Hennessy!"

I ignore his demand and swing my hand across the layout one more time. All bets are down so I let the cards fly. The plasticized paper rectangles arc through the air. The first lands gently behind SH's bet just as the card to the new guy leaves my fingertips. I'm lofting them for soft landings to expedite the game. My first card drops from my hand landing face up as the second round of cards take flight. Finally, I slide my hole card under my face-up card—a ten of clubs—and slip them into an engineering marvel called a peek.

The peek is a contraption embedded in the table that allows me to see if the card under my ten is an ace, or vice versa. It reveals a blackjack and nothing else, so I can't succumb to the evils of cheating. It sounds mystical but is merely a simple, and yet very secret, system of levers and pulleys.

I gaze into the peek and see white. It's not a blackjack. I look to SH and wait for her move. She tucks her cards under her bet telling me she doesn't want another and stands on the hand. The drunk guy picks his nose and analyzes the results with everyone on the table watching

in disgust, including me because that finger will inevitably touch the cards. He lowers his hand and either wipes it on his pants or under the table.

I pat the layout in front of him. "Hey. You're up."

Chuck looks at me then at his cards then back at me. The nose-picking hand comes up from his lap and joins his other hand in claspings the cards. It was bound to happen, but what he's doing is forbidden.

"One hand," I inform him holding up a finger.

He stares at me so I reach over and tap his nose-picking hand with my finger. "Only use one hand to hold the cards."

Slowly he lowers the offending hand, tucks his cards under his bet and starts fishing his cigarette from the ashtray.

I look to the new guy. His cards are already tucked. Coming back to my hand, I seize the cards by the corner, slide them from the peek and flip the hole card using the face-up card. Twelve. In a flash I pull a card from the deck and lay it neatly next to my face-up ten. The new card is a four for a total of sixteen. I draw one more, a five. I have twenty-one. The best anyone can muster is a tie.

I reach over and begin checking everyone's hands from right to left, spreading the cards neatly and handling the money. The new guy loses with a twenty, so I take his bet. Chuck also has a twenty, so his bet goes as well. He expels a snort of smoke to show his displeasure. SH has 18, so I take her money and the \$5 she bet for me and thank her. She beams. It takes less than four seconds to complete the check-and-grab.

My incredible speed comes from simple pattern recognition. Shortly after learning to deal, all dealers find they no longer have to count. The umpteen combinations become so apparent that one glance at a hand gives an immediate total. This automation applies to payouts as well. For instance, calculate in your head, in one second, the 1.5:1 blackjack payout on a \$37.50 bet. It's tough, but see it a hundred times and the payout is automatic . . . \$56. (The .50 pays even money.)

I sweep my arm above the table ready to deal the next hand and notice that the new guy has doubled his bet. It appears he's attempting a progressive betting scheme. It works great if you have unlimited money and the table has no maximum bet limit. Unfortunately, every table does to prevent such strategies. There are variations, but in the simplest, like the new guy's, you bet the minimum every time you win, and when losing you double every losing bet until you beat the losing streak. Then you cut back down to your original bet. In essence you are attempting to weather a bad run by recovering the loss from the previous losing hand. However, at most, it takes only eight straight losses to lose your ass.

The new guy thinks he's clever, so I won't say anything. The smart ones learn best the hard way.

I let the next hand fly, and when all is settled, I'm showing an ace. I sweep my hand across the layout as if calling for bets to be placed, only this time I ask, "Insurance?"

Insurance is a little-understood bet. The name throws people off. You're not *insuring* anything. If the dealer has an ace-up blackjack then you automatically lose your original bet. Insurance is a side bet that the dealer has that blackjack. The amount of the side bet can be up to half of the original bet in the circle. If I have a blackjack and you placed an insurance bet then your original bet loses and your insurance is paid two to one. It sounds complicated but in essence it's a sucker bet unless you're keeping track of the cards and believe the chances that a ten is under the dealer's ace are fairly high.

SH puts a red \$5 cheque on the insurance line. It's a complete shot in the dark. Chuck and the new guy simply sit without moving, the universal sign for screw the insurance.

I slide the cards under the peek and see ink, a ten. That's my cue to slide the cards out and reveal the blackjack. Everyone groans. SH yelps.

"Goddamnit!" Chuck yells as I flip player cards and pull money. The only person who comes out fairly well is SH. I take her bet and pay the insurance two to one. She says thank you and gives me the winnings. Crazy.

The sweep of my hand gets everyone betting, albeit slowly, for the next round. The new guy bets \$40. His first bet of \$10 lost. He upped it to \$20 and lost that, so now he's doubled it to \$40. Chuck slams another \$10 on the circle then sits up and looks around.

"Cocktails!" he yells across the pit.

SH puts \$10 in the circle plus \$10 up top for me. So *strange*. I deal the hand and to showboat I add extra spin to the new guy's final card. It sails through the air and lands whirling on top of his bet. It's 50% luck, but my customers suspect I'm a card shark.

I'm showing a ten, face up. Automatically I place the cards in the peek and see a red A. Without hesitation I flip the cards over showing my blackjack. Everyone but Chuck throws their cards in disgust. Back to back dealer blackjacks are rare but not as rare as you would think. Without waiting or saying I'm sorry—something you never do as a dealer—I begin the check-and-grab but stop when I get to Chuck.

"Sir . . . Chuck, I need your cards," I tell him but he seems intent on trying to intimidate with his sleepy eyes. I tilt my head and raise a brow as if dealing with a three year old. "You want to take 'em home, frame 'em?"

Nothing but contempt comes back from him. I turn my head, without taking my eyes from the table, and call:

“Dean. Assistance.”

In no time Dean is at my side. I inform him of the situation.

Dean addresses Chuck, “Sir, what’s the problem?”

Slowly Chuck lays his cards down and we all see that he too has a blackjack. I fail to understand the problem. We both have blackjacks, so we push. He neither wins nor loses which is more than I can say for everyone else on the table. Still, he presses his nose-picking finger firmly on the center of the cards and demands: “Pay my blackjack. This cocksucker didn’t ask for insurance, and I was gonna take it!”

“Sir, the dealer only offers insurance when he shows an ace up. I see he had a ten up so insurance is not offered. Do you understand?”

Chuck works it over in his head before answering. “Pay my blackjack!”

Dean reaches over and takes the cards from under Chuck’s finger and tosses them on the center of the layout. “Push his bet and move on. He gives you any more grief we’ll call security,” he says loud enough for everyone on the table to hear.

I nod and finish the hand as Dean retreats to the podium. Chuck stubs out his smoldering filter and mumbles his displeasure in a discourse of spicy epithets as he lights a new cigarette. He draws it down half an inch and blows the smoke in my face.

I wave it away.

“That bother you?”

“Nah. It just aggravates my tumor,” I reply, effectively dulling his barb.

SH cackles and places another \$10 bet in the circle and a green \$25 cheque up top for me. “This is for your operation.”

Oh please. I shift my eyes to my watch and see that I still have six minutes to burn. *Jeez.*

I deal two more hands and draw to 21 on both. This is typical for me but rare that I go five hands straight with twenty-one. “At least it’s not a blackjack,” I tell everyone as I take their money.

This gets nothing but unsavory retorts. Even SH, who one hand earlier was all smiles, has flipped. I’m unconcerned because I know her Jekyll and Hyde impersonation is impeccable.

With the next deal my cards seem to take a turn. My face up card is a six, great for the players. There’s a good chance I’ll bust on the draw. The customers seem to brighten. SH tucks her cards and mouths *thank you* to me and winks. Mr. Jekyll, I presume.

Next is Chuck, and he informs me, “If you get another twenty-one, I’ll kill you.” He throws back a shot of Hennessy delivered by a buxom cocktail waitresses named

Heather—who he didn’t tip—then draws his cards slowly across the felt for a hit. It’s a seven. His hands tremble, and his face goes crimson. He glares and slaps his busted cards on the table.

I can’t help myself. “You drew a card against a dealer’s sixteen?”

Chuck burns a stare into me as I take his cards and failed bet and add, “Hope I didn’t need that card in order to bust *my* hand.”

Chuck seethes.

I move to the new guy. He’s studying his basic strategy chart and inspecting his dwindling rack of cheques. I figure he has a pair of eights, and the chart is telling him to split them. This means he must double his bet and put up another . . . \$320 I count. The split disrupts his entire betting system, and he appears troubled in deciding what to do.

He puts down another \$320 and tosses his cards on the layout, a pair of eights. I reach over, split the cards into two hands and place a new card next to the first eight. He now has fifteen. Without consulting his chart he makes an imprudent move and takes another hit. I oblige him and lay out a six for a total of twenty one. *Lucky dog!* We move to the second eight, and I place another eight on top. This really confounds him because basic strategy says to split these eights as well. He does and places another \$320 in the circle. Again, I split the eights and deal to the first. He hits it to a total of twenty, not too shabby. The next he plays wrong and busts with twenty two. I take the \$320 and clear the hand.

I flip my hole card and it’s not a ten. It’s an ace for a total of seventeen, but it’s soft seventeen because of the ace, and in this casino, we hit soft seventeen. I draw another card, a five, giving me a solid twelve. The next cards are an ace, thirteen; another ace, fourteen; a deuce, sixteen; and . . . I can feel it in my bones. It is inevitability. I know a five is coming and sure enough . . . Five.

“You bastard!”

Hello, Hyde.

After SH’s invective, Chuck finishes counting my hand on his fingers, realizes I have a seven card twenty-one and swats his fresh beer. Its contents spill across the layout and into my rack of cheques.

“Fuck this!” he yells, flicking his cigarette in my direction and missing. Momentarily I think he’s going to lunge and take a swing at me. It’s happened before, but usually the person is so drunk they miss wildly and end up with my hand on the back of their neck pinning them to the layout as we wait for security. Chuck restrains himself and lowers his head as Dean comes over and asks if everything is okay.

“Sure. Why?” I ask with a smile.

Dean sees the mess. "Alright, who . . ."

"I got it."

Dean smiles because he knows I relish these pissing contests and will lay the culprit to waste. He says, "Finish the hand," then leaves to retrieve towels and fresh cards.

I take the second of the new guy's split bets and tap the first for the push. SH sits with her arms folded over her belly as I take her money. The cards remain; the beer has managed to touch every one of them—except those in my hand—and they are ruined.

For four minutes I daub my cheques dry with towels. Dean watches for security purposes until every cheque is clean and back in the dry rack. Next, I firmly blot the felt layout then drop the soiled towels to the floor. The old cards are discarded and two new decks are delivered, shuffled and cut by the new guy. (I skip Chuck—dealer's prerogative.)

"The cards should be better now," SH says all googly-eyed. "I'm betting on it." She places \$10 in the circle and \$50 for me. It's so odd it scares me, and I don't say a word for fear she'll snap.

When SH comes to my table I know she's drunk. It's the only time she'll play with me. It's difficult to determine how drunk she is because she doesn't behave like your typical drunk, like Chuck. She's more of a Schitzo. Tonight I notice her inebriation when she unexpectedly pulls her bet and hauls herself out of her chair.

"Watch my chips. I'll be back," she states and bee-lines towards the bathrooms. There's an odd delicacy in her step and, to my horror, a large dark stain on the back of her pants. She has wet herself.

I call Dean over.

"Nice," is all he says, placing a towel on her seat.

When she leaves for good we'll replace the chair. These things happen. The worst I've experienced was a woman sitting at third base, drinking Bloody Marys. She'd been playing all day and never once left her chair through the swing shift. She either had a monster bladder or a catheter leading to a jug in her purse. It wasn't until the house was at its busiest when, in the middle of a hand, she dropped her forehead to the rim of the table for a moment then lifted it and wiped drool from her lip with the sleeve of her blouse. I thought she was spitting in her lap so I called over the floorman, Rosa. Rosa approached the woman to see if she was feeling well but prematurely turned and backtracked to the podium. Within a minute, security was asking the woman to step away from the table. It was a memorable event because she could neither speak nor walk. Security had to lift her from the chair, limp and dripping, place her in a wheelchair, and transport her to the linoleum-lined drunk tank. A team of porters immediately moved in to remove the chair and

clean the vomit and urine on the floor beneath. I nearly lost it.

"Let's go," I say, arcing my hand across the table before the cards fly. Chuck and the new guy seem confident that a missing player will change the cards. Chuck belligerently bets everything while the new guy's progressive folly has thinned his rack.

Immediately they are in trouble. I have an ace up and call for insurance. The new guy places \$320 on the insurance line. It's half of his current bet.

The peek shows nothing; the insurance bet loses. Chuck seems preoccupied as he blows on the glowing tip of a new cigarette and draws for a card. It's a ten and he busts. He's peaceable as he lays his hand down. I take his cards and money and move on to the new guy.

Because he took insurance, I figure he must have a pair of tens. Usually you bet insurance with a great hand or if you know something that justifies the bet. In this case he hits! And busts! He took insurance on the first deal from a new deck, *and* he had fifteen! I think the strain of losing his money so fast has affected his judgment, and he abandoned the strategy chart. *Stupid*. I take his money and cards, flip my cards, show a fourteen and clear my hand away without hitting.

I sweep my hand for bets. Chuck sits back sucking on his lost-and-found smokes and stares at me. He is broke. The new guy abandons his betting scheme and places his final \$15 in the circle. I bring my hand up ready to deal the final blow when someone taps my shoulder. It's my relief. *My work is done here*.

I spread the cards across the layout, clap my hands and flip flop them so the overhead cameras can see I'm taking nothing from the table. "I'll be back in twenty. You guys have a great time . . ." I say, then add: "And good luck."

I can't help myself.

My relief steps seamlessly into my space and I walk away with a familiar sense of satisfaction.

At the podium, I retrieve my paperback book from the bottom drawer and leave the pit. I read as I walk. It keeps me from having to socialize on my way to the break room. The last thing I want on my break is a customer's sass. As I walk through the casino, I intersect a group of security officers pushing a wheelchair. Slumped in the seat is SH, passed out, strapped in, and drooling on her shirt.

"What happened to her?" I ask.

The big one, Gene, says, "She passed out on the toilet."

"No shit. What's that, third time?"

"Fourth"

"Jeez."

We recommence towards the back of the house. "You might want to tell pit one. She left cheques on my table."

"Yeah," Gene says. "Long night?"

"Long . . ." I answer truthfully, "but satisfying."

"WHAT THE HELL happened?" I ask Gene who is standing over me.

"Some guy assaulted you with a cane. Knocked you for a loop."

I sit up, slide my back against a slot machine and feel a tender swollen line across the back of my head. "A cane?" Immediately I realize who it is. *I'll kill you if you get another twenty-one . . .*

"You guys catch him?"

"Uh . . ."

"Why the hell not?"

"He was pretty fast."

THE CASINO GAVE me two nights off to recover from my protuberance. To appease me for the lax security, they offered me a comp to the gourmet restaurant. I took it. Tonight is my first night back, and I have a dead table and . . . *Ten minutes. Are you kidding me?*

On the table to my right, SH sits with her back to me. Ike's doing magic tricks across the aisle, and Levi is telling the story of her hysterectomy. I've heard it countless times over the years. The knock to my head has not affected my attitude nor my superb dealing skills, but I am thinking of promoting myself to floorman. It means more hours and more responsibilities, but at least I'll be able to walk away from someone before they really piss me off. Only . . . I don't know how satisfying it will be. After all, I'm a dealer, and I trade in vices, both theirs and mine.

Someone hobbles up to my table pulling me from my thoughts. It's the drunk guy, Charley or Chip or something, with a new cane, a half-empty bottle of Corona beer and oblivious to who I am.

"How's the fucking table?" he asks in his alcohol-dulled speech and takes a seat while throwing a wad of bills on the layout.

I'm thinking perhaps I should call Dean and tell him that this is the guy who assaulted me the other night, but I don't. Instead, I smile and answer, "Table's fine. How much you have here?" as I start to spread his money.

"A fucking butt load," he informs me.

A fucking butt load . . . ten minutes, tops.